

in Rev Simpson

MM 54.

S 38.2

"In confession to a priest in accordance with the teaching of the Church of England?"

A SERMON

PREACHED BY THE

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With Reference to a Sermon Preached by the Rector of St. Paul's Church, Charlottetown, and published in the "Morning Guardian," September 29th, 1891.

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The Apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, gives this advice: "As much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." So I think it should be our earnest endeavor to abstain from religious controversy as much as possible, and, while we hold our own opinions firmly and definitely, to make every allowance for others who hold different views, and give them credit, at any rate, for being as honest and straightforward in their belief, as we ourselves are. But there must be a limit to this charity and elasticity. "The wisdom that is from above is first *pure*, then peaceable," says St. James. So while we are anxious to maintain peace we must often be ready to fight long and vigorously for the purity of that religion, which we hold dear as life itself.

Personally, I very much dislike controversy—it arouses angry feelings, stirs up strife and promotes ill-will. I would much prefer always to preach to you the Gospel of Christ, and be utterly regardless of what is said or done about us

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outside. I am prepared to recognize that the Church of England is broad and comprehensive in her ritual and doctrines, that she allows a wide difference in the manner of conducting service, duly considering the various tastes and habits of her people; that she binds her members to few hard and fast rules and regulations, so that within her pale there may be great diversity of opinion on things not essential to salvation; but when a priest of the Church goes out of his way to abuse one of the ordinances of the Church and accuse his brother priests of doing the devil's work because they follow the plain directions of the Prayer Book, I feel it my bounden duty to enter upon my own defence and the defence of those souls who come to me for penance, counsel and absolution; and although controversy is unpleasant, yet I am always glad when the subject of confession and absolution is brought to the front by it, because it always results in a victory for the upholders of this doctrine. Every now and then England blazes for a few weeks with a fiery contention about this doctrine of confession. Newspapers, religious and secular, are filled with letters and articles on the subject. Orators denounce it in public halls, ministers preach against it from scores of pulpits, and the consequence is that men and women enquire into the matter, see that it is Scriptural, feel that it is helpful, resolve to avail themselves of its benefits, and hundreds of new penitents flock to their priests to take advantage of this means of grace which heretofore they had looked upon with suspicion or avoided as a soul-destroying contrivance of the great enemy of mankind. And everywhere else, as far as my experience goes, the question has but to be discussed to convince men that it is in accordance with the teaching of the Church of England, in accordance with God's Holy Word, and most helpful for overcoming sin.

Now I want to speak very plainly. You know that during the Mission, Father Huntingdon spoke at two of the after meetings on "Confession of Sin to a Priest," pointing out its reasonableness, its manliness and its usefulness. Last Sunday the Rector of Charlottetown in a sermon attacked

this doctrine as unscriptural, unorthodox and the invention of Satan for ruining bodies and souls.

I was not present at St. Paul's, and so can only gather from others what was said, and as I know from personal experience that the preacher's words are very often distorted and misquoted, I have been very careful in checking off the statements I wish to bring into question, and feel sure they were made. And the sermon was published at length in the *Morning Guardian*, and as no corrections have appeared, it is only reasonable to suppose that the report is accurate. Yet if I should find that after all I had been misinformed, I am prepared to make the humblest and fullest apology for anything I may say here to-night.

Believe me, I speak as I do from no ill-will—no want of charity—no desire to compel everyone in the Church of England to observe all that we do. So far I have always lived in peace with my brother clergy, recognizing that while there were certain wide differences between some of us in non-essentials, we might all be loyal priests of our Church, and I have been always ready to assist them in any way I could. But now a direct charge of disloyalty has been made against me—so direct, that though no names were mentioned, no one could doubt to whom the charge referred particularly, at that time, and consequently I must make a stand and do my best to vindicate my teaching.

This is apparently the position of affairs at present :—We—the priests of this Church—declare that it is in accordance with the teaching of the Church of England that if any one feels his conscience troubled with his sins, he is at liberty to confess those sins to a priest and receive absolution from him in the Name of God. The Rector of St. Paul's declares (if he is correctly reported) as follows : "I do not hesitate to say, and I say it solemnly as in God's sight, that I fully believe that the devil has never invented a more successful scheme for ruining the bodies and souls of thousands than this doctrine of auricular confession and priestly absolution. The proof of this would be easy and

might be made overwhelming, and those who know the system best would be the last to deny it." It is manifest, therefore, that one of us must be a traitor to his church and false to his ordination oath, for every priest has to vow at his ordination to "be ready, with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's word ; and to use both publick and private monitions and exhortations, as well to the sick as to the whole, within his Cure, as need shall require, and occasion shall be given ?"

If the Church of England holds that auricular confession is an erroneous and strange doctrine, then, as an honest man, I must preach against it or *leave that Church*. But, on the other hand, if the Church allows and recommends the doctrine, then every priest who cannot accept that doctrine ought to resign his charge, or *at least* remain silent on the subject, and not accuse those who do teach it of doing the devil's work.

To-night I intend only to show that voluntary confession of sin to a priest, and the absolving of the penitent by the priest *is allowed* by the Church of England, as may be proved by reference to her formularies. I shall not have time to deal with the question whether the doctrine is Scriptural—that must be deferred to some other day. Now I only wish to make clear to all whom it may concern, that we are not betraying our Church when we bid those who desire it—(and mind *only* those who desire it—there is no compulsion about it)—to come to confession.

Bear in mind then, that the question under consideration is not—is voluntary confession to a priest Scriptural—not is every one bound to confess to a priest—not even is confession right or wrong—but is private confession and absolution under any circumstances in accordance with the teaching of the Church of England, and if so, has a priest of that Church any right to denounce that doctrine and those who uphold it?

The line of argument I intend to follow is doubtless

familiar to most of you, you have heard it before, and yet it is just as well to recall it, because you, as well as I, should be able to defend our Church, and perhaps your own practice in a clear and definite way.

I maintain that any man who denounces private confession as the invention of Satan, cannot honestly remain a priest in the Church of England and accept her money. And I am sure every unprejudiced person, be he Catholic, or Protestant, or Agnostic, or Atheist will agree with me, if he will but lay aside all party spirit and consider the plain grammatical meaning of the following parts of the Prayer Book :—

(i) Every priest of the Church of England has these words said over him at his ordination, while the Bishop lays his hands upon his head :—

“Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the Imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven : and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful Dispenser of the Word of God, and of his holy Sacraments ; In the Name the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

It looks as if the Bishop *pretended* to give power to retain or remit sins, does it not ? But perhaps it will be said that this forgiveness simply means preaching the gospel of forgiveness to those who truly repent. If so, it is a pity that the compilers of the book did not make this more clear so that one would not be likely to confound it with the power professedly given before the Reformation to Priests of our Church at their ordination, when the same words were used. But, just for the time being, we will allow that these words may mean no more than the declaration of God's forgiveness of sinners in a general way.

(ii) In the long exhortation which is ordered to be read on the Sunday before the Holy Communion is celebrated the priest has to say :—

“And because it is requisite, that no man should come to Holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's Mercy, and with a quiet conscience ; therefore if there be any of you, who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requireth further comfort or counsel,

let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness."

Here is certainly an invitation for one troubled in conscience to go to some priest and confess his sins and receive absolution. Will one who declares such a confession is an invention of the devil for destroying souls, *dare* to read this which his Church orders him to?—*dare* he, if one comes to him as he is bidden, to open his grief—become the emissary of Satan and hear that confession?—*dare* he help destroy that soul by giving absolution?

But he may reply that the man comes to open his grief, not to confess his sin, and he receives absolution by the ministry of God's Word, *i. e.*, the exposition or application in his case of the promises of Holy Scripture, not by the priest absolving him in God's name.

I think every intelligent man would call that quibbling, but again we will, for the sake of argument, allow that perhaps it means nothing more, but even then it implies cases wherein the priest has a right, (which is denied), "to pry into the spiritual condition of the souls" of those who come to him at his own invitation and to administer some sort of absolution to them for the quieting of their conscience.

(iii) On Ash Wednesday every priest is ordered to read the Communion Service to his congregation. The service opens with this exhortation:—

"Brethren, in the Primitive Church there was a godly discipline, that, at the beginning of Lent, such persons as stood convicted of notorious sin were put to open penance, and punished in this world, that their souls might be saved in the day of the Lord: and that others, admonished by their example, might be the more afraid to offend.

Instead whereof, (until the said discipline may be restored again, which is much to be wished), it is thought good that at this time, (in the presence of you all) should be read the general sentences of God's cursing against impenitent sinners."

Now a person could not be put to open penance until he had confessed his sins, and it was the priests or bishops

who inflicted that penance. Is that which was "a godly discipline" in the primitive Church *an invention of Satan* in the Church of the 19th century? Will a priest who tells his congregation on *Sunday* that this is a soul destroying doctrine, tell the same congregation on *Ash Wednesday* "It is much to be wished that this discipline may be restored again."

(iv) If you turn to the Office for the Visitation of the Sick, you will see this rubric among others :—

"¶ *Here shall the sick person be moved to make a special Confession of his sins, if he feels his conscience troubled with any weighty matter. After which Confession, the Priest shall absolve him (if he humbly and heartily desire it) after this sort.*

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences: And by His authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Surely this is plain enough—there can be no plea here that forgiveness only means *preaching the Gospel*—the priest has to say "By his authority committed unto me, *I absolve thee from all thy sins.*" When was that authority given, but at his ordination when the Bishop said "Whose sins thou dost forgive they are forgiven?" And this is emphatically *Priestly Absolution*, because the Rubrics in the office for the Visitation of the Sick all speak of *the minister* except this one which says "After this Confession, *the Priest* shall absolve him," showing that no minister *not a priest*, is entitled to absolve. Can it be possible that the Church looks upon this doctrine as an "*invention of the devil*" when one is in health, and *recommends* it—nay more—commands her priests to move people to make use of it when they are sick? If so, would not the absolution run thus: "Our Lord Jesus Christ who hath left power to His Church to absolve *SICK* sinners who truly repent and turn to him?"—but instead of that it says "*all sinners*," therefore it must mean both sick and whole.

Could any priest who declared that he fully believed "that the devil has never invented a more successful scheme

for ruining the souls and bodies of thousands, than this doctrine of auricular confession and priestly absolution," dare carry out the orders of the Prayer Book and move a sick person to make a confession and then absolve him? I should hope not. But what if he refuses? Listen to the solemn oath every man has to take when he is ordained:—

"I, (A. B.) do solemnly make the following declaration: I assent to the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion and to the Book of Common Prayer, and to the ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons; I believe the Doctrine of the Church of England as therein set forth to be agreeable to the Word of God, and in Public Prayers and administration of the Sacraments I will use the Form in the said Book prescribed, and none other, except so far as shall be ordered by lawful authority."

Notice he declares his belief that "the doctrine of the Church of England as set forth in the Prayer Book, be agreeable to the Word of God." The doctrine of the *confession* and *absolution* of a sick person is in the Prayer Book, and therefore must be agreeable to the Word of God, according to his own declaration, how then can it be an invention of Satan?

And Canon* 38 of the Church of England says: "If any minister, after he hath made and subscribed the declaration aforesaid, shall omit to use the Form of Prayer, or any of the Orders (and the Order for the visitation of the sick is among these) any of the Orders or Ceremonies prescribed in the Communion Book, let him be suspended; and if after a month he do not reform and submit himself, let him be excommunicated; and then if he shall not submit himself within the space of another month, let him be deposed from the ministry."

Suspension—excommunication and deposition, then, are the legal consequences of refusing to use this office.

I appeal to every *honest* man and woman, of any religion whatever—suppose you had never heard of confession except when it was denounced—suppose you had been

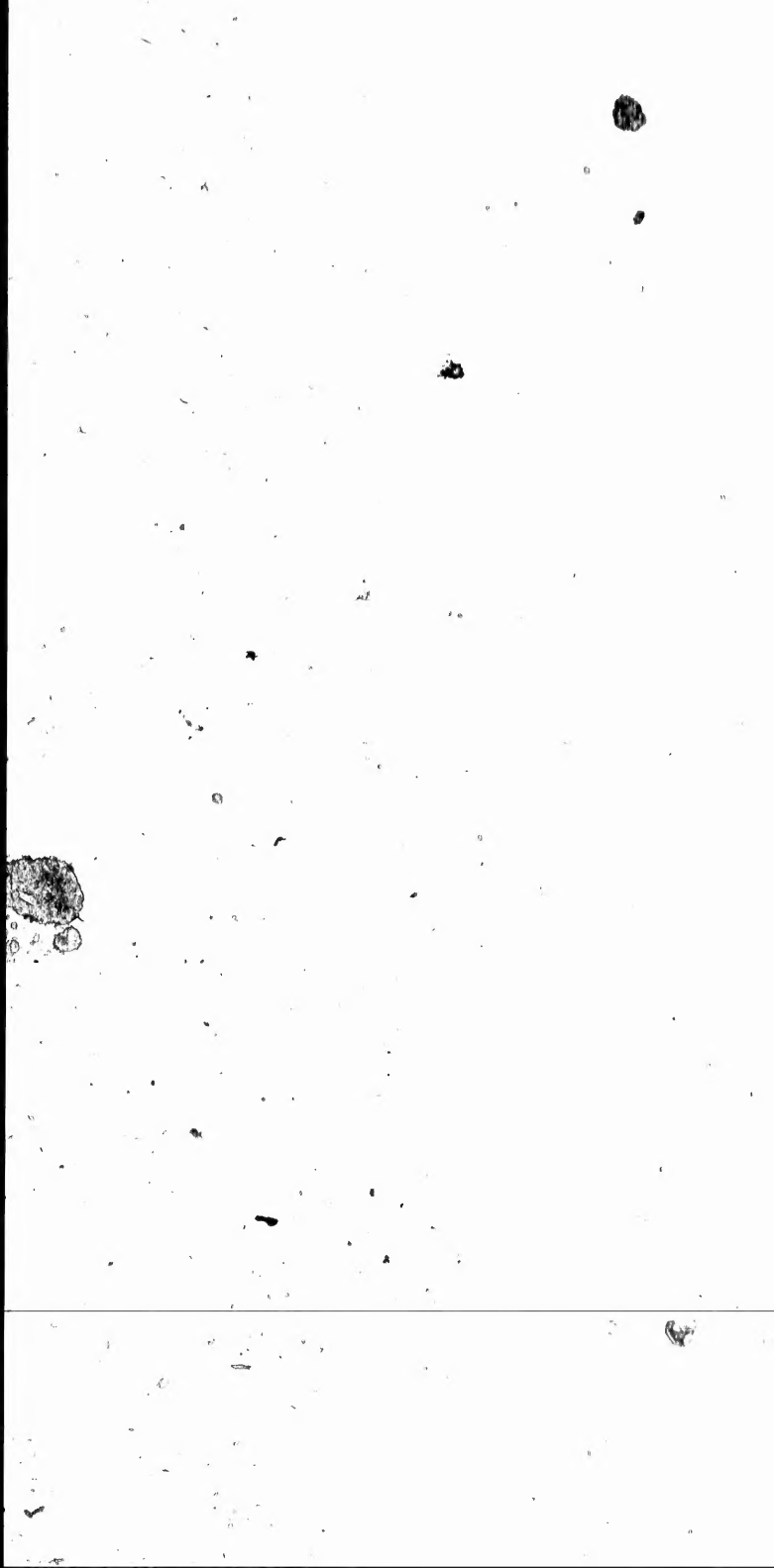
* The Canons are the rules and regulations of the Church of England, drawn up at the time of the Reformation.

taught to abhor it as a vile and unholy thing all your life—what would be your feelings if you were moved to make such a confession upon your sick bed? Would you not recoil with horror from such a thing? Would you not think that your clergyman was trying to ruin your soul and lead you astray? Of course you would. Can you not see, then, that this rubric in the Order for the Visitation of the sick *presupposes* that every one has been taught to make his confession while in health and strength, and that having been accustomed to make it, or at least hear about it all his life, he also makes it in preparation for death.

(v) Again, the 113 Canon of the Church of England declares: "If any man confess his secret and hidden sins to the minister for the unburdening of his conscience, and to receive spiritual consolation and ease of mind from him, we do not in any way bind the said minister by this our constitution, but do straitly charge and admonish him, that he do not at any time reveal and make known to any person whatsoever, any crime or offence so committed to his trust and secrecy . . . under pain of irregularity." Irregularity, let me explain, means not only the deprivation of the priest, but renders him utterly incapable of holding any office for the future.

Does any sane person think that the Church would take the trouble to place such a canon on her statutes if she considered confession a doctrine invented by Satan for the destruction of souls?

Against all this mass of accumulative evidence, in *favour* of confession, we have brought the quotation from one of the Homilies. Perhaps I had better tell you what the Homilies are. At the time of the Reformation, when there was great diversity of belief among the clergy, it was thought necessary, for the sake of avoiding confusion, to forbid many priests to preach their own sermons, and instead they were supplied with Homilies or sermons compiled by those in authority. Two books of Homilies were therefore published, and the 35th article of Religion refers



to them as containing a Godly and wholesome doctrine, necessary for those times. But Bishop Harold Browne, a very moderate Churchman, commenting upon this article, says: "All writers on the subject have agreed, that the kind of assent which we are called upon to give the Homilies is *general*, not *specific*. We are not expected to express full concurrence with every statement, or every exposition of Holy Scripture contained in them, but merely in the general approve of them as a body of sound and orthodox discourses, and well adapted for the times for which they were composed. For instance, we cannot be required to call the Apocrypha by the name of Holy Scripture or quote it as of Divine authority, because we find it so in the Homilies. We cannot be expected to think it a very cogent argument for the duty of fasting, that thereby we may encourage the fisheries and strengthen the seaport towns from foreign invasion, because we find it so in the Homilies," and I may add there are many Churchmen who would hardly be prepared to call marriage a Sacrament because it is so called in the Homilies. But let us see what this "Homily on Repentance" says: "It is most evident and plain that *this* auricular confession hath not the warrant of God's Word." What auricular confession does the writer refer to when he says *this* auricular confession? He goes on to tell us "the numbering of sins as hath been used heretofore in the times of blindness and ignorance." He does not mean, then, *private* confession simply considered, but a *particular system* of it, "used in *the times of blindness and ignorance*,"—manifestly the system of his day and of the generation immediately preceding it—the system which he says "was not used in St. Augustine's time"—the present system of the Roman Church, which compels every one, willing or unwilling, to make private confession to a priest before receiving Holy Communion. For the Homily goes on to state: "It is against the true Christian liberty that any man should be *bound* to the numbering of his sins, as it hath been used *heretofore*"—and is that not exactly what we hold? No man is *bound* to come to confession, but we priests are bound

to exhort men to come, and bound to hear and absolve them if penitent, when they do come—each one must decide for himself—there is no compulsion in the matter—no binding as in the Church of Rome. Each may take advantage of this means of grace, or decline to do so, as he sees fit. But if the sermon is fairly reported, the extract from the Homily on Repentance is garbled, and that which might weaken the case suppressed. This is the quotation as given: "We ought to acknowledge none other priest for deliverance from our sins, but our Saviour Jesus Christ, Who being our Sovereign Bishop, doth, with the sacrifice of His Body and Blood, offered once for ever upon the Altar of the Cross, most effectually cleanse the spiritual leprosy and wash away the sins of all those that with true confession of the same do flee unto Him."—Then there are some dots to show that something is left out, and then follows,—“but it is against the true Christian liberty that any man should *be bound* to the numbering of his sins as it hath been used heretofore in the times of blindness and ignorance.” Now what do you think is omitted as represented by those dots? This is part of it: “*I do not say but that if any do find themselves troubled in conscience, that they may repair to their learned curate or pastor, or to some other learned Godly man, and show the trouble and doubt of their conscience to them, that they may receive at their hand the comfortable salve of God's Word.*” That puts rather a different complexion on the Homily, does it not? for at least it does not contradict the teaching of the Prayer Book, but recommends people to confess their sins if they want to. Well did the Rector advise his congregation, a year ago, when he was inducted, not to accept anything he told them from the pulpit without going home and verifying the same from God's Holy Word, and he might have added from the Book of Common Prayer as well.

I have not time to-night—as I said—to take up the Scriptural authority for confession and absolution. But I do think that I have shown plainly enough for any unbiassed

person, no matter what religious opinions he may hold, that the Church of England does at least allow, and in some cases recommend, confession to a priest, and does order that, if the penitent desire it, the priest shall absolve him from his sins in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost; and therefore any man who declares publicly that such confession is an invention of the devil for destroying souls, is out of place as a priest of the Church, and cannot honestly accept her money.

In conclusion, let me read you what the three great Reformers of our Church—Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley—say on the subject. I have verified all these quotations and believe them to be perfectly accurate. Cranmer says: "Now God doth not appeal to us with a voice sounding out of heaven, but He hath given the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and the authority to forgive sins, to the ministers of the Church. Wherefore, let him that is a sinner, to one of them, let him acknowledge and confess his sins, and pray him that according to God's commandments, he will give him absolution and comfort him with the Word of Grace and forgiveness of his sins, and when the minister doth so, then I ought steadfastly to believe that my sins are truly forgiven me in heaven."—(Cranmer's Catechism, page 202.) (He also, on page 183, calls absolution a *Sacrament*.)

Latimer, after condemning compulsory confession, says: "*To speak of right and true confession, I would to God it were kept in England, for it is a good thing, and those who find themselves grieved in conscience, might go to a learned man and there fetch of him comfort of the Word of God, and so come to a quiet conscience, which is better to be regarded than all the riches of the world.*"—(Sermon ii. 399, edition 1824.

Ridley says: "*Confession unto the minister, which is able to instruct, correct and inform the weak, wounded and ignorant conscience, indeed I ever thought might do much good to Christ's congregation, and so I assure you I think*

to this day."—(Letter to Master West, Eccles. Biog., vol. iii, page 67.)

The Lutheran doctrine is thus given in the Augsburg Confession of Faith, which corresponds to our 39 Articles: "*Therefore we teach that private absolution is to be retained in the Church*, and we greatly extol its value and the power of the Keys." The Lutherans in Norway and Sweden have to make their confession before receiving Holy communion to this day. And even Calvin, although he denied the Sacramental virtues of absolution, yet recommends confession in his Institutes. He says there: "Let every believer remember that it is his duty, if he feels such secret anguish and affliction from a sense of his sins that he cannot extricate himself without some exterior aid, not to neglect the remedy offered to him by the Lord, which is that in order to alleviate his distress, *he should use the private confession with his pastor*, and to obtain consolation, should privately implore his assistance, whose office is both publicly and privately to comfort the people of God with the doctrines of the Gospel."—(Institutes vol. iii., chap. iv., sec. 12.)

Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley, Luther and Calvin all uphold the doctrine of confession, then, and yet *modern* Protestantism teaches that it is the invention of Satan for destroying souls. Alas! how has modern Protestantism fallen from the teaching of its founders of 300 years ago.

Believe me, brethren, it is very painful for me to speak in the way I have done, and it is only the stern sense of duty which compels me now. I care not for what people outside the Church of England say about us, but when a priest of the Church denounces a doctrine of the Church, and those who hold it, it is only fair to *his* congregation, to *this* congregation and to *myself* to show that we have some authority from the Prayer Book for teaching what we do. I hope later on to take up the Scriptural authority for this doctrine, and also its helpfulness to those who feel the

burden of their sins. Meanwhile, if any of you require further information for yourselves or your friends, I shall be happy to give it to the best of my ability.



Copies may be obtained Free from Rev. James Simpson

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